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STATHIS KOUVELAKIS

SYRIZA'S RISE AND FALL

Syriza won power in January 2015 as an anti-austerity party—the most advanced political opposition so far to the hardening deflationary policies of the Brussels–Berlin–Frankfurt axis. Six months later, the Tsipras government forced through the harshest austerity package Greece had yet seen. This trajectory was a predictable outcome of the contradiction embodied in Syriza's programme: reject austerity, but keep the euro. Why was Tsipras so incapable of envisaging a course inside the EU but outside the Eurozone, the position of Sweden, Denmark, Poland and half a dozen other European countries?

FIRST, ONE SHOULDN'T underestimate the popularity of the euro in the southern-periphery countries—Greece, Spain, Portugal—for whom joining the EU meant accessing political and economic modernity. For Greece, in particular, it meant being part of the West in a different way to that of the US-imposed post-civil war regime. It seemed a guarantee of the new democratic course: after all, it's only since 1974 that Greece has known a political regime similar to other Western countries, after decades of authoritarianism, military dictatorship and civil war. The European Community also offered the promise of combining prosperity with a social dimension, supposedly inherent to the project, which sealed the political compact that emerged after the fall of the Junta. Joining the euro seemed the logical conclusion of that process. Having the same currency as the most advanced countries has a tremendous power over people's imagination—carrying in your pocket the same currency as Germans or Dutch, even if you are a low-paid Greek worker or pensioner—which

those of us who'd been in favour of exiting the euro since the start of the crisis tended to underestimate.

Even now, after five years of some of the hardest shock therapy ever imposed—and the first imposed on a Western European country—public opinion is still split on the issue of the euro, although now with a much narrower majority in favour of staying in. This frame of mind also reveals a very strong subaltern mentality in Greek society, which probably goes back to the formation of the state in the 1830s—an ideology that emanates from the Greek elites, who always felt inferior to their European counterparts and had to demonstrate how faithful they were; they always thought they owed something to the Western powers. And indeed, each time their power was threatened, Western intervention played a decisive role in securing the existing social order, more particularly in the 1940s and the period leading to the 1967 military coup.

Second, in contrast to the position of Sweden, Denmark or the UK, for Greece quitting the euro would be extremely conflictual, because it would mean breaking with the neoliberal policies of the Memoranda. If you are serious about this, you have to be prepared for a confrontation. From 2012, when Syriza emerged as the largest opposition party, poised for government, it was clear that Tsipras didn't want that fight, which is why he switched to a stance of staying in the Eurozone. Syriza's original position was summed up by two slogans: 'No sacrifice for the euro' and 'The euro is not a fetish', which left open the question of how far to go in confronting the Eurogroup and the Troika. But this line was shelved soon after the June 2012 elections.

In the summer of 2015 it was Tsipras who used the argument of fear—that exiting the euro would mean chaos. In early June, after the Eurogroup rejected the Greek terms, which had already been intended as a capitulation, the Syriza Finance Minister Euclid Tsakalotos was asked by Paul Mason what would happen if Greece left the euro. He replied that it would be a return to the 1930s—the rise of Nazism! Tsipras himself used the image of collective suicide. What such statements reveal is that, for the Syriza leadership, exit was unthinkable—a black hole. It was outside their cognitive mapping, alien to their strategy which had already ruled out the possibility of an all-out confrontation. I think that's the only thing that was clear in their minds. The main point of the 'turn to realism' taken by the leadership after losing the June

2012 elections by a narrow margin was to show that the option of exit had been definitively abandoned. Earlier, there had been an ambiguity about going in that direction, and therefore a certain openness. But really it was dropped after the elections of June 2012, the implicit justification being that we shouldn't scare the more moderate voters whose support was needed to win the next election.

You say that leaving the euro had to involve an all-out confrontation, but, on the contrary, Schäuble was offering to ease Greece's way. He could see the Eurozone would be much more coherent without Greece, and offered concrete assistance.

Well, first, we don't have enough information about what exactly happened, what the terms of Schäuble's offer were and to what extent it represented the position of the German government as a whole. What we do know is that Schäuble said there were two possibilities—either swallow the Third Memorandum, or exit the euro, with which we will even offer some assistance—but it's hard to believe that this was not to be accompanied by conditionalities.

But surely this should have been explored?

Absolutely. That is exactly what we in the Left Platform said at the time.¹ In fact, one of the main arguments Tsipras used against us was that we were siding with Schäuble—they played on that hysterically during the entire summer of 2015. But it should have been explored. In fact, Panagiotis Lafazanis and others argued in the Cabinet in May that the government should send a representative to have informal talks with Schäuble, but Tsipras turned them down. He categorically refused to discuss the possibility.

Tell us about the ideological formation of Syriza as a party. Did Eurocommunism play a dominant part?

Politically, there is no linear continuity between Eurocommunism and Syriza. The majority of Synaspismos members, who formed the bulk of Syriza, came from the orthodox Communist Party. Tsipras; Yannis

¹ The Left Platform was a bloc within Syriza led by Panagiotis Lafazanis, Minister for Energy in the first Tsipras Cabinet from January until July 2015. He and the LP's 25 other MPs broke with the party in August 2015.

Dragasakis; Synaspismos's first leader, Maria Damanaki; the secretary until recently, Dimitris Vitsas—all these people came from the ΚΚΕ, which they left in 1991. The Syriza coalition, formed in 2004, included many other components—Trotskyist groups, Maoists, *altermondialistes* and so on—as well as the remnant Eurocommunists, the ΑΚΟΑ. But the intellectual culture which permeated Synaspismos was dominated by traditional intellectuals from Eurocommunist backgrounds, and this had an impact. Indeed, the party's theoretical institute is named after Nicos Poulantzas.

Could you explain in more detail the stages of Syriza's evolution after the June 2012 elections, when it emerged as the national opposition with 27 per cent of the vote?

After the 2012 elections there was a general perception that it was just a matter of time before Syriza took office, one way or another. The Tsipras leadership made very clear and, in a sense, very tough decisions in that summer of 2012, about the party's line and about the type of party they wanted. First, they needed to turn a coalition of disparate organizations into a unified party; this was quite widely recognized, and there was no real disagreement about it. They also wanted to use the unification process to transform the culture of the party and its organizational structure at a very deep level. Instead of a push to recruit people who'd been active in the social mobilizations of the period, the aim was to open the gates to the sort of people who want to join a party when they think it has a serious chance of accessing power—clientelist mentalities and habits are very deeply rooted in Greek society, including in the popular classes; there's a type of micromanagement of social relations.

These would be people who'd previously been in PASOK and had seen it go down the drain?

Yes. This process also included bringing in figures associated with the political establishment. This wasn't done to win votes, because these people were completely discredited in electoral terms; it was a signal to the establishment: we are in the process of becoming a normal party. Again, these were people from PASOK backgrounds, who had served in the governments of Simitis or Papandreou—there were not many of them, because it created quite a reaction inside Syriza. Panagiotis Kouroumbis, for example, who is now the Minister of the Interior and Administrative

Reconstruction; or Alexis Mitropoulos, Vice President of Parliament in the previous mandate; or Christos Spirtzis, the former President of the Technical Chamber of Greece and current Minister of Transport and Public Infrastructure, well known for his connections with business interests in the construction sector. Tsipras and Dragasakis built close ties with Louka Katseli, who had been a senior figure in PASOK governments. Though she didn't join Syriza, there was an official collaboration, and now she's the Governor of the National Bank of Greece. This process was replicated at intermediate levels of the party. The Syriza leadership did everything they could to get these people on the electoral lists in 2015—though with only partial success, because there were strong reactions from the local branches and the regional executives.

Turning Syriza into a leader-centred party was the second aspect of the process. The aim was to move from a militant party of the left, with a strong culture of internal debate, heterogeneity, involvement in social movements and mobilizations, to a party with a passive membership which could be more easily manipulated by the centre, and keener to identify with the figure of the leader. It was striking that the two key party gatherings—the first national conference in November 2012, the founding congress in July 2013—were both called at point-blank notice; we had a month to prepare. Of course, things needed to move fast because of the political conjuncture, but these fast-track procedures were used to create bloated bodies that were much too large for effective decision-making. There were 3,500 delegates at the founding congress. The first Central Committee had 300 members, the second 200—and it was a fight reducing it to that. The leadership clearly wanted to erode the militant political culture and move to a top-down electoral machine.

How did this mesh with the political realignment you've spoken about?

The inner-party restructuring went together with the rightward drift. From the summer of 2012 onwards, the position on the euro was transformed into a constant display of fidelity to the Eurozone. This was expressed in Tsipras's trips to mainstream institutions, mainly in the US—the Brookings Institute and so on—but also much more exclusive places like the Ambrosetti Club, which played a crucial role in Italian politics during the 1970s and in the development of the 'historic compromise'. It was in October 2013, at the LBJ School of Public Affairs

in Austin, Texas, that he made the famous statement, ‘Greece should not exit the Eurozone: that would be a disaster for Europe’, which effectively shut down the debate. The drift was equally marked in relation to the debt. Eric Toussaint, who played a leading role on the Debt Audit Commission set up by Parliament Speaker Zoe Konstantopoulou, has confirmed that there was a clear shift by the Syriza leadership in the summer of 2012, when they reversed their previous position of repudiating the debt and mounting an international campaign against its legitimacy. The formulations in the party documents didn’t change, but it was the usual kind of double discourse: in the programme there are statements about socialism, no sacrifice for the euro, we will go forward whatever it takes, and so on; but these were no longer expressed publicly, especially not by Tsipras and the circle round him.

Second, from 2012 onwards, the type of political practice favoured by the Tsipras leadership didn’t move beyond parliamentarism. It was clear that Syriza wanted to bring down Samaras’s coalition, but only through parliamentary tactics, focusing on the presidential elections in late 2014.² They didn’t want a strategy of popular mobilizations to push the process forward. It’s true that the big wave of mobilizations in 2010, 2011, early 2012 had died down—precisely because the energies had now been diverted to the political level. But there was absolutely no perception of a defeat for those mobilizations at the time; the sense was just that we can’t achieve all that we want by occupying squares—we need a political and electoral alternative. At several points between 2013 and 2015 there were moments when mobilizations could have been relaunched: when Samaras shut down the public broadcasting company, ERT, in June 2013; the murder of Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn in September of that year; the transport workers’ strike in early 2013, and potentially the teachers’ strikes in June and September 2013 as well.

At this point the Tsipras leadership also started building bridges to people in the core state apparatuses—military and diplomatic circles—and began to indicate their loyalty to the fundamental tenets of the Greek state. His people made approaches to the more centrist wing of New Democracy, around Kostas Karamanlis; one outcome was the election of Prokopis Pavlopoulos as President of the Republic in February 2015, an emblematic figure of that grouping. The first meeting between Tsipras

² Parliament elects the Greek president with a qualified majority, which Samaras did not have.

and Shimon Peres was in August 2012. Of course this had not been approved by any party body, nor would it have been at that time. It was also at this point that Tsipras brought various military and diplomatic figures into his close circle, who clearly oriented his approach to international and geopolitical issues.

So Tsipras had complete autonomy from the party?

The operation was not totally successful. Tsipras never succeeded in doing what Pablo Iglesias has done for Podemos, where there isn't a single deputy from the left wing of the party. Iglesias has succeeded in totally excluding the wing around the *Anticapitalistas* from the parliamentary party—people like Teresa Rodríguez and the opposition at the Vistalegre assembly, who didn't agree with his extremely top-down model for the party. There was much more resistance to that in Syriza, because it had been only partially transformed—until last summer, it remained to a large extent a party of activists who had spent their lives in the Greek radical left.

But the key positions were held by the old Synaspismos leadership, and yes, they became completely autonomous even from the leading party bodies. Tsipras's personal staff were beyond the control of anyone in the party. So was the Commission for the Programme—essentially dominated by the Commission for the Economy, led by Yannis Dragasakis. He is an almost Balzacian figure, obscure and public at the same time; a man always moving in the corridors, or behind closed doors, but at the same time enjoying the image of being very serious and reasonable, when the reality is the exact opposite. He was supposedly in charge of the Commission elaborating Syriza's programme, with the result that by the early autumn of 2014, when elections were looming, Syriza had no manifesto. The reason was political, not technical: Dragasakis wanted his hands completely free. He knew he couldn't put the programme he really wanted down on paper, because the party wouldn't accept it—but he was the most open in saying the only option was improved management of the Memoranda framework.

What was his political background?

Dragasakis was a senior figure in the Greek Communist Party (ΚΚΕ), who entered the coalition government with New Democracy in 1989—

he was in the Ministry of Economics. He eventually used the connections he had with the *nomenklatura* in Eastern European countries to facilitate business arrangements between Greek entrepreneurs and the new economic elites emerging there in the 1990s. So he had close relations with Greek business circles, especially bankers. The Greek economic establishment considered Dragasakis a point-man in Syriza they could trust—which was certainly not the case with Tsipras, whom they didn't know at all. Tsipras had been a second-rank figure in Synaspismos until he was chosen out of the blue by Alekos Alavanos in 2008 and offered the co-leadership, in an attempt to reinvigorate the party.

Nevertheless, Tsipras was the key figure in the evolution of Syriza?

Yes, absolutely. In fact Dragasakis had stepped down from the Party Secretariat in 2010, when things seemed to be stagnating. It was Tsipras who brought him back and put him in charge of the Commission for the Economy, although in reality Dragasakis, despite the degree he holds, knows nothing about economics. But the political responsibility was in the hands of Tsipras. That is crystal clear.

So how did the Thessaloniki Programme of September 2014 come about?

Everyone knew that elections were likely in the next few months, so Syriza desperately needed a programme. A 150-page document was circulated during the summer, supposedly drafted by Dragasakis, but actually just a copy-and-paste of documents by different party commissions—it was a disaster. So an emergency programme was drafted very hastily, to be presented at the annual Thessaloniki International Fair in September—it's a custom for Greek political leaders to make programmatic statements there. The Left Platform fought hard, and on several issues the Group of 53, the left of the majority bloc, pushed in the same direction. As a result, the Thessaloniki Programme foretold the coming disaster. On the one hand, a set of commitments that clearly broke with austerity politics: nationalization of banks, renegotiation of the debt with a large write-off, restoration of the minimum wage and the labour legislation scrapped by the Memoranda; an end to the over-taxation imposed in recent years, especially on low- and middle-income households; development of public employment; restoration of electricity to households that had been cut off; extra meals in schools, and so on.

But the other side of the coin was that all measures that entailed a fiscal cost were meant to be implemented within the framework of a balanced budget, and without new taxation—especially not on capital. Some of the demands, like public-sector employment, were supposed to be financed with subsidies from the EU—which presupposed an agreement with the other side. So it was clear, if you read the programme carefully, that the actual line of the leadership was that of ‘honourable compromise’, a term Dragasakis had already elaborated. The contradiction inherent in proclaiming a middle ground between the Memoranda and what were, in principle, Syriza’s commitments, was already embedded in the Thessaloniki Programme.

The non-accountable power structures of the EU had expanded and hardened between 2010 and 2015—compulsory fiscal targets and structural adjustment for all, not just the Troika countries. So the opponent that Greek and European lefts confront is extremely powerful, highly mobilized and well-armed in terms of its own programme and the tools at its disposal. Was there any recognition or analysis of this by the Tsipras government?

Yes and no. One reason why the Syriza leadership started backtracking in 2012, I think, is that they understood that if they had won the election, it would have been a confrontation that they couldn’t control. Before that, they had just been surfing on the dynamic of the situation. Despite the talk about smashing neoliberalism and so on, when it came to the real thing they got scared. That was the moment of truth. At the same time, they had a lot of illusions about what they could get from Europe. When Tsipras went to address what was, in a way, the real audience—the representatives of ruling circles in Europe and the US—the logic of what he was saying was: ‘Look, I’ll lay down my radicalism, of which you are rightly afraid, but in which I don’t genuinely believe. I see things differently now, and I’m ready to be a nice boy, much more reasonable than you think—but I should get something in return.’ He really believed he could get something—that was clear.

The result, you could say, was objectively the worst political betrayal perpetrated by any contemporary left-wing force—certainly in Europe. But ‘betrayal’ is an inadequate explanation. It has moralistic and psychological overtones, which are not particularly useful for political analysis. It also suggests that things went according to a plan, which is not true in

this case. The plan when they took office in January 2015 was: ‘We’ll try—quite hard—to find a good compromise, and then hope to move forward from there.’ They were then taken aback by their complete impotence and inability to get *anything* done. One could call it naivety, though that’s not a useful term either, for some of the same reasons. Rather than ‘naivety’, it’s the state of mind of a left which has already accepted a subaltern position. An illustration: in April 2015, when at the lenders’ insistence Tsakalotos had been substituted for Varoufakis in the Greek negotiating team, he was asked by Amélie Poinssot, a highly informed French journalist at *Mediapart*, what had surprised him most as a minister. Tsakalotos replied that he had prepared very thoroughly for his first trip to Brussels and delivered a carefully thought-out paper, but was disappointed by the low level of debate—‘The other finance ministers just recited rules and procedures!’ He was living in some kind of Habermasian dreamworld, presupposing a will to find common ground, a ‘win-win deal’—that was the jargon of Syriza’s first few months. They lacked not just the perception of class antagonism but the elementary realism that any political figure needs in order to survive.

Didn’t Varoufakis come out with similar statements?

Varoufakis is a more complex figure. As we now know, he was doing things behind the scenes that showed he had an awareness of the need to go beyond what was being said in public. At the same time, he signed up to the 20 February 2015 agreement, constantly defended it and was the first to make statements, as early as February 2015, saying Greece should adopt 70 per cent of the Memorandum. He bears a lot of responsibility for what happened. Nevertheless, he had a clearer perception of the situation and was keen to adopt a more confrontational attitude within that framework—and in fact this was why Tsipras chose him. Tsipras sensed that, even if it was pure theatre, some such stance was necessary if only for purposes of legitimisation, or possibly for getting some concessions, and that Dragasakis would be quite incapable of playing that role. He needed a more flamboyant figure like Varoufakis.

To seek the good compromise?

Yes, to pursue that chimera.

The ECB's first move in the week Syriza entered office was to tighten conditions of lending to Greek banks—seizing the Greek economy by the throat—while capital fled the country. What's your assessment of the government's response? What could it have done?

Institute capital controls—it's obvious. James Galbraith, who was part of a small team set up by Varoufakis to work on scenarios and proposals, said in an important interview last summer that he had suggested instituting capital controls to Tsipras at the time. He said Tsipras categorically rejected the idea, because 'it would have put Greece's membership of the Eurozone in danger'.

Cyprus had enforced capital controls for nearly two years and was still in the Eurozone.

Exactly. It was clear that Tsipras's circle didn't want to take any measure of self-defence. It's true that instituting capital controls means your euro is not exactly equivalent to the others. But it would have been a vital step. There was a massive bank run underway—savings were flowing out of the country, and the liquidity of the banking system relied exclusively on the emergency mechanism of the ELM once the main financial channel had been cut off by the ECB in early February. The whole atmosphere in those first few weeks of February was extremely confrontational. The negotiations were very tough. In Athens people had started taking to the streets in support of Syriza; there was even some solidarity in other European cities. A scenario of confrontation still seemed credible, but it was being undermined because of the pressure on the Greek banking system. Capital controls could have stopped that—and avoided the capitulation of the 20 February agreement, when Syriza accepted the extension of the Memorandum. They tried to sell it as a compromise—to win time. This was bullshit, of course; they had already turned down elementary self-defence measures that were coming not only from the ranks of the Left Platform—we'd been calling for capital controls from the outset—but even from people within their own team.

With the 20 February agreement Syriza abandoned its position of repudiating the Troika's second Memorandum and instead extended it for four months, through to 30 June 2015, promising to honour all payments to the lenders; on the other hand, the €7.2bn bailout funds specified by the Memorandum would

only be released if Greece implemented all its measures—pension cuts, redundancies, etc. It was never quite clear at the time what Tsipras and Varoufakis were negotiating for in that first three-week period. Did their demands shift?

They were negotiating what they called a ‘bridge programme’, which would take them to June. The hope was that it wouldn’t be accompanied by the same conditions. They wanted to win time until the summer, because they knew the debt repayments would be lower after that—the bulk of the repayments for 2015 were due between February and August. Varoufakis’s tactic was one of permanent negotiations, through which the iron cage of the Memorandum would gradually be loosened. He was serious about pushing the game of chicken to the farthest possible limit, because he genuinely believed that Schäuble and the Eurogroup would make substantial concessions, that the ideological cost for them would be too great. But this completely overlooked the asymmetry of the situation—behind the seeming sophistication of all those game theories, you find a lack of elementary political realism.

Naturally, Schäuble and the other finance ministers stuck to the letter of the 20 February agreement: not a penny of the €7.2bn ‘bailout’ loan until they had seen the measures of the Memorandum fully implemented. Yet the Syriza government kept up its interest repayments?

Yes. Tsipras never succeeded in getting any money from the Eurozone during this whole period. That’s why Syriza appropriated all the cash reserves of the public agencies—hospitals, schools, municipalities, universities—to hand over to the IMF and ECB, as each month’s interest payments fell due. And so the €7.2 billion was paid exclusively out of domestic reserves; Greece was the only country in the world to repay its public debt that way. No Greek leader had done that before—although of course neither Papandreou nor Samaras had been denied the bailout funds. But it’s instructive that Tsipras preferred to hand over that money rather than contemplate a rupture.

Schäuble said of Tsipras at the time of the February 2015 agreement: ‘I’d like to see how he sells this at home.’ How did he?

With a wink and a nod. The discourse of Tsipras and his supporters served to suggest: ‘This was imposed on us against our will, we did our best, there was no other option. But since it’s against our beliefs, we

will deploy all the inventiveness of the descendants of Ulysses to circumvent and undermine the conditions, to cheat in some positive way within the constraints. Yes, we formally approved them, but deep within ourselves, we don't believe in the documents we signed.' This is the official narrative: 'This is a coup; we might have made mistakes, but essentially we are victims.' Tsipras said as much to Costas Lapavistas in April 2015, just after Varoufakis had sent the second list of reforms, which included measures that would have a sharp recessionary effect. Lapavistas pointed this out to Tsipras, who replied: 'Look, we say we'll do that, but do you *really* think we will?' When the Eurogroup said the Greeks were not serious, there was an element of truth in it. It's the cunning of the subaltern who says, 'Yes, of course', but then cheats. Tsipras was playing that game. This was how he sold the capitulation to the electorate in September 2015.

How would you describe Syriza's relations with the Greek media?

This is a key point. We use the term *diaploki*—literally, 'interconnection' or 'interweaving'—to describe the collusion of private and public interests, at the geometrical centre of which is the media. Of course this is a much broader, probably global, phenomenon. The Greek TV channels and newspapers are owned by businessmen who do business with the state and have direct, privileged relations with politicians. Needless to say, the media were massively hostile to Syriza during its rise. The 2012 election-campaign coverage had a Latin American atmosphere, with the TV stations broadcasting a *golpista* message—this is not a legitimate governing party, we will do anything to prevent it from gaining power. The level of symbolic violence was incredible. The tone of the public broadcaster, ERT, was more controlled, but it has always been run by the successive governments—co-managed, if you like, by New Democracy and PASOK. In order to get a job there, even as a cleaner, you had to be on one of the parties' lists. This is perfectly normal in Greece; it applies to most of the public sector.

The key figure in Syriza's media strategy has been Tsipras's closest collaborator, Nikos Pappas. Pappas's father was a leading figure in the ΚΚΕ (Interior), playing an important role in the student insurrection in 1973; he became a full-time party worker after the fall of the Junta, always on the right of the party, very Europeanist. In the 1990s his son was active in the Synaspismos Youth, where he met Tsipras; they're the same age.

He studied economics in Scotland and got a job in the party apparatus when he returned to Athens. Pappas was essentially put in charge of the dirty work. He managed to exploit the media magnates' delicate relation to the law and the banks. Many of these outfits never paid their taxes—they owe a lot of money to the state. Even public broadcasting never followed legal procedures—there was no tender process. Their enterprises are very poorly managed, none is truly profitable; they owe billions to the banks. So a government can easily blackmail these people, threaten to cut their credit lines and so on. They knew that if Syriza got into office they could be under threat. But Syriza also wanted a *modus vivendi*, and Pappas quickly started making deals. 'You owe money, what you're doing is illegal; I have information that you're on the Lagarde List'—that is, with undeclared Swiss bank accounts—'So: you will hire ten people I trust, and your media will say X and Y.' This sort of thing has become totally institutionalized. Striking a deal with the media was part of forging a stable and permanent arrangement with the Greek bourgeoisie. Politically speaking, that's the centre of this whole enterprise.

But haven't the private TV channels remained absolutely vituperative?

Not really. The shift came in 2014 with the European and regional elections, in which Syriza triumphed. After that there was little doubt it would win the next general election. From that moment on, the attitude of the main private media changed. The line now was: Tsipras is more reasonable than people thought, but he needs to get rid of Syriza's irredeemable radical wing, particularly the Left Platform. The same line was taken up by the international media.

Meanwhile the ERT had been shut down by Samaras in the summer of 2013?

Completely—in a matter of hours. They announced it at five in the afternoon and closed it at nine, I think. The broadcasting ended, but the riot police only came in to evacuate the building in November. So the building was occupied for several months and became a buzzing centre for all sorts of mobilizations, concerts, demonstrations. The employees set up an alternative TV channel, which moved online after the police shut down the transmitters. It was extraordinary: a huge central building permanently occupied by its workers, who were developing an alternative information model. If Syriza had had the political will, they could have turned that into something that would have changed the dynamics

of the situation—but they didn't. Lafazanis was the only senior Syriza figure who visited the building every day.

In April 2015 Syriza reopened the ERT and re-hired most of the people who had been sacked, but they reverted to the old model—a broadcasting company controlled by the state. The figure they appointed to run it, Lambis Tagmatarchis, was an ornament of the corrupt PASOK media establishment during the Simitis and Papandreou years. There was no Troika intervention to make them appoint him. It was a totally independent decision.

What positive aspects of its programme did the Syriza government implement between January and July 2015?

Very few. There was an unprecedentedly low level of legislative activity. No more than ten or twelve bills were passed in that first period. Most were positive, but they were very limited: a minimal package to deal with the humanitarian crisis, about one-sixth of the package announced in the Thessaloniki programme, including reconnection of electricity, but targeting only the most desperate cases; the €5 entry ticket to go to hospital was scrapped—a widely hated Memorandum measure. High-security prisons were abolished, which was positive; reform of the nationality code as well. Tax arrears could be paid in a hundred monthly payments—the arrears are gigantic, about €90 billion, or half of GDP—but this measure was partly revoked by the Third Memorandum. In a few cases, Left Platform ministers could pursue some initiatives. For instance, Lafazanis blocked privatization of land around Piraeus and of the national power company.

What role did the Left Platform play in public criticism of the leadership?

In my opinion, we didn't do what we should have done. Because the Left Platform's best-known figures were in the Cabinet, they were absorbed by their ministerial responsibilities and couldn't play the same public political role they had before. We tried to substitute for them by promoting other people who had more freedom to express themselves, but it wasn't easy. However, all the internal debates during that period were very public: it was headline news if the Left Platform's websites criticized government decisions, which we did—we were open about what we thought of the situation at each stage. We attacked the 20 February

agreement ferociously on the Central Committee, and made it clear that we wouldn't accept any surrender.

The Central Committee was convened only three times between January and July—the last meeting, after the capitulation, was a total fiasco. But the amendments of the Left Platform got 40 per cent of votes in the first meeting, and 44 per cent in the second, which meant other currents were supporting our positions. These amendments were proper texts, articulating our overall disagreement with what the government was doing. Our approach was to try to bring the left of the majority bloc with us. This included part of the Group of 53, but also figures like Zoe Konstantopoulou, Manolis Glezos, the Maoists; even people like Yiannis Milios, who were anti-capitalist but hostile to any discussion about leaving the euro. So the Left Platform acted as a pole of attraction, especially among the rank and file—but the party itself didn't play a significant role. The Left Platform didn't react to the marginalization of the party as it should have done. We should have put forward our own alternative programme. We did agree in April that we would finalize a text, and Lapavistas had started working on it, but the Left Platform leadership never gave the green light. And then we were overtaken by events in June, and the lead-up to the referendum.

What were the programme's main points?

It would have been a concrete road map articulated around the four measures we have consistently put forward since the start of the crisis: default on the debt, nationalize the banks, impose capital controls and prepare for an alternative currency, in that order. It would also have involved taking unilateral legislative measures: re-establishing labour legislation, instituting a special tax on capital—to demonstrate a clear political will. The green light never came, I think, because this would have meant the Left Platform's four ministers leaving the Cabinet. But they should have been prepared to leave it. The Tsipras leadership was ruthless, whereas we were going by the book—arguing in the branches and on the Central Committee, publishing material on our websites, organizing events. But they had marginalized the party and were not accountable to anyone. The decision-making process was sealed inside the Cabinet: actually not even the entire Cabinet, but informal circles around Tsipras and Dragasakis, which we called the 'para-centre of power'. It was easier for me to be more outspoken, to push the boundaries of what could be said,

as I had no position in the government. But we should have opened up fronts elsewhere, waged an unconventional war.

It's true that this would have needed broader support, beyond the party. I've studied quite a few Latin American situations for points of comparison and reflection. In Chile, where the left of the Unidad Popular did try to mobilize beyond the party apparatuses, a journal like *Chile Hoy* played an important role in regrouping people from the left of the Socialist Party with social movements, elements of the Christian radical left, of the far left and so on. These kinds of possibilities are necessary for an unconventional strategy that can really destabilize the leadership. I don't want to minimize our collective responsibility, or even mine personally; but others are answerable for this, too. The far-left Antarsya coalition has some potentially very interesting activists and could have contributed, but they were too sectarian. To sectarians, those closest to them always appear as the biggest obstacle, so rather than trying to build something with us—and, when the final confrontation was approaching, trying to unblock the situation—they spent their time denouncing the Left Platform more fiercely than they did the Syriza leadership. And of course the extreme sectarianism of the ΚΚΕ contributed to the negative developments from 2010 onwards. We could have been spared the coalition with the Independent Greeks if, in 2012, the ΚΚΕ had accepted a minimally unitary line with Syriza. That would have regrouped all the left forces that emerged from the communist matrix in a new political dynamic, which in those circumstances would have had real potential. This is exactly what the ΚΚΕ didn't want, because it would have opened up a dynamic that would go beyond anything they could figure out.

Another task was to help clarify the real economic costs—and benefits—of quitting the euro system, so Greeks could make an informed decision.

Yes. I'm not an Althusserian, but in this case the notion of the epistemological obstacle is valid. The mantra of left Europeanism, the belief in a 'good euro', blocks any understanding of what the alternatives might be. A level of technical expertise is obviously necessary here; even if this means it's not easily available for wider public use, the knowledge of its existence acts powerfully as an argument in public opinion. That's necessary, too—it must not remain a discussion between experts. That was the responsibility of the Left Platform, and our record is mixed. We did a lot of the work, in the sense that everyone knew from the start of

the crisis that we thought the solution had to involve euro exit and an all-out confrontation with the Troika and the Greek oligarchy. We fought on this basis consistently from 2010 onwards. But we failed to provide a properly elaborated alternative vision and a counter-programme that would have triggered a broader public debate.

How clear was the Left Platform at the time about Tsipras's position during this period?

From the outset we knew that capitulation was on the table as an option. Our calculation was that the Eurogroup and Troika might want to humiliate Tsipras so badly that even he would say no—or that the conditions could be created in which he would have to, because they were going too far. But we misjudged the temporality of the process: the war of attrition that the government resorted to, with those pseudo-negotiations, lasted months. After the 20 February agreement it imposed a climate of passivity and exhaustion. We also underestimated the concrete and symbolic effects of seizing the reserves of public institutions to repay the debt until there was nothing left in the public coffers. With no money left, I don't know what we could have done, even if we had taken control of the situation. We should have reacted at that moment, but we didn't. The closer we got to the critical, cathartic moment in the sequence, which was the referendum and the capitulation that followed, the less we could control the situation.

When the referendum was announced, we thought our approach had been vindicated. We'd wagered that, reaching deadlock, Tsipras would eventually take an initiative of this sort and that it would liberate energies. This is exactly what happened during that crazy week: the referendum unleashed a radicalization across society which expressed itself in the vote. By late June, Tsipras was ready to accept the Eurogroup's ultimatum, but there was a rebellious mood everywhere—within the party, but also outside it—and he couldn't capitulate without at least a simulacrum of a battle. That was what the referendum was for him. But he hadn't anticipated how confrontational it would be, with capital controls, the banks closed, people queueing to get a maximum of €60 per day out of the ATMs.

The rally of Friday 3 July in Athens—before the Sunday of the referendum—was one of the biggest in Greek history. It was extremely

impressive not only in numbers but in its combative spirit and mood. The movement of the squares had also attracted masses of people, but the mood then was more dispersed and less militant. Now it was a politicized crowd, asking for a battle. That evening, 3 July, Tsipras walked across from the prime minister's office, Maximus Mansion, which is close to Syntagma Square. When he entered the avenue leading to the square, the crowds stretched for kilometres, up to the Hilton Hotel. An immense crowd carried him to Syntagma, in an accidental Perón-style triumph. The result was that Tsipras got extremely scared—physically. He started perspiring, and cut the speech he had prepared by three-quarters. It was to be a forty-minute talk and he spoke for just eight, improvising on how much the Greeks love Europe and so on. The atmosphere was exactly what the Left Platform's approach had aimed at. But it came too late, both in terms of the material possibilities that existed at the time and in the sense that, for Tsipras, this was really an epilogue, to prepare for the final capitulation—a way of saying that he had played all possible cards and demonstrated that nothing else could be done.

The Syriza leadership was divided over the referendum?

Yes. The most corrupt or rightist elements in the Cabinet were against it. Dragasakis was fiercely opposed; Stathakis spoke against it; Panousis, Interior Minister at the time, was also against it. They thought the risk was two-fold. First, they could see the situation getting out of control and Tsipras being overwhelmed, even though they understood that was not his intention. Second, they knew capitulation was coming and thought a referendum would only increase its costs. I talked to some intellectuals close to Dragasakis who issued a text in the Greek press at that time, calling on Tsipras to cancel the referendum, and that was their line of thought. So, five minutes in the mind of Alexis Tsipras: the situation was deadlocked, the 30 June deadline was upon him, he had already made his best attempt at a capitulation with the 47-page Greek proposal that he submitted at the end of May; the Eurogroup had rejected it and replied with the Juncker package, essentially demanding that Greece comply with every Troika instruction. It was a take-it-or-leave-it ultimatum. And clearly, inside the party the signs were that people were not ready to accept this. The same went for public opinion more generally: Syriza MPs and local branches were getting messages from far beyond activist circles. People were really angry with the Eurogroup negotiations, thousands were signing up to calls on social networks saying, "Tsipras, come

back now! Take the next flight!’ The idea of a referendum was in the air, floated by government ministers, actually—not particularly by us.

Hadn't the idea first come from George Papandreou, back in 2011?

Yes, in a way. But also Tsakalotos and others had said, ‘Why not a referendum on austerity, if it comes to it?’ As for Tsipras, the one certainty we have is that he only thinks about tactics. There are two possibilities, not mutually exclusive. The first is that he thought he could get what he said: a further sign of popular support to improve his position in the negotiations. The question posed would be sufficiently vague—No or Yes to the Juncker package—that it wouldn’t raise the issue of rupture with the euro. He must have imagined this would take place in a relatively controlled and calm atmosphere—clearly he completely underestimated the effect of bank closures, shortage of currency and so on, when the ECB upped the pressure by cutting off the emergency funding mechanism to the banks. The tension rose suddenly that Monday, 29 June, with the banks closing. At that point it was clear, I think, that Tsipras either wanted the Yes to win, or a very narrow margin for the No.

The second possibility is that he had already taken the decision to sign up to the Third Memorandum, but needed a display of bravery up to the last moment, to legitimize it—so that he could say, ‘You see, I’ve used all the weapons I had, and I couldn’t get more than this; there is no alternative.’ So, those were the intentions. The reality was that he was totally overwhelmed by the dynamic unleashed by the referendum. He was the sorcerer’s apprentice—he had liberated forces that then had their own autonomous movement. In a few hours he demolished all the bridges and the consensus-oriented approach he had been building for three years. Perhaps the most useful thing in Paul Mason’s politically misleading YouTube documentary, *#ThisIsACoup*—of course it wasn’t a coup!—is the footage of how shocked and scared the key government figures were when they saw the referendum results, the scale of the *Oxi* vote. It speaks volumes about what these people had in mind. And the contrast between this and the jubilant Varoufakis who, in his politically unreliable way, was nevertheless ready to go one step further. In the end Varoufakis didn’t accept the capitulation—he was not ready for that, despite the fact that he was against exiting the euro, or at least extremely reluctant to consider that move. This is why he left.

After the extraordinary 61 per cent No vote in the 5 July referendum, not just Tsipras but almost all the Syriza deputies voted to capitulate—only two Syriza MPs voted against, with eight abstentions. Did that come as a surprise? Was there any retribution against them from the public, after such a huge vote?

Not such a surprise. But yes, it created an enormous trauma. Activists I spoke to in the district of Fokida, near Delphi, a relatively impoverished area, told me that in small villages Syriza representatives were leaving their homes at 5am, and returning very late, to avoid meeting anyone. They were ashamed. In Athens, party people didn't turn up to their jobs for days—they couldn't face their colleagues. Well-known figures didn't dare go shopping in their own neighbourhoods. Greece became a crazy country in which, on 6 July, we were asked to forget what had happened the day before; in which the Prime Minister met with the vanquished side and agreed to all their terms! From 14 July onwards, after the final Eurogroup meeting, the party started to disintegrate, with the membership leaving *en masse*. Syriza is now a shadow of its former self. It had never been a mass party, properly speaking—it peaked at 35,000 members. As a point of comparison, New Democracy has 400,000 registered members; PASOK had even more before 2009. The majority of the activists have left; those who stayed in Syriza either have some kind of governmental position or they work for the party. It has completely lost its trade-union base, which joined Popular Unity. The only social sector where Syriza had nearly no losses was academia—an effect of statization, ideological decomposition and the mad Europhilia which is part of the symbolic status of a Greek university professor.

Syriza voted through the Memorandum in August. Tsipras immediately called an election for 20 September. Given the referendum result, why did Popular Unity do so badly in the election?

First, we should have acted quicker. We had a closed meeting of the Left Current, the main component of the Left Platform, on 16 July, and took the decision to leave. We thought it would strengthen our position if we waited until the Memorandum was actually passed before we left—to say: this is one thing that can never be accepted. But it was a tactical mistake to delay until August, once the elections were called. Tsipras of course manipulated the calendar to call snap elections the day after the Memorandum was passed, so we had only four weeks in which

to launch a new political formation. The electorate hardly knew what Popular Unity was. People could identify Lafazanis as a figure, but in the polling stations they were saying, 'What's this?', and many were surprised when they realized he had left Syriza. Another key factor is that, even after the break, we didn't present any developed alternative programme. There was a lack of confidence on the part of Popular Unity's core leadership; they still behaved as if they were Syriza's internal opposition. They hadn't sufficiently liberated themselves from that line of thought and practice.

That's one set of reasons. Another was the prevailing demoralization. People who were totally opposed to what had happened just stayed home on election day. Turnout was an historic low. Tsipras won with only 1.9 million votes. By comparison, PASOK had got over 3 million in 2009. Popular Unity is not a negligible force. Membership is over 5,000, with a diverse militant core: the bulk of the forces come from the Left Platform, but there is also a current from Syriza's Group of 53, including important figures in campaigns for migrants and social rights, and the so-called Althusserians of Antarsya. But it's weakened by the fact that it has no representation in parliament, which means the media isn't forced to take us into account. Of course it entails financial consequences; the party is much weaker in terms of resources than in militant power. Still, even on occasions like the recent anniversary of the Polytechnic insurrection or the social protests, Popular Unity has proved it has a greater mobilizing capacity than the rump Syriza—New Syriza, we might call it.

What are the terms of the Third Memorandum, which New Syriza is now pushing through?

Greece is now a semi-protectorate: a bigger Kosovo. There is a new austerity package, with further cuts and taxes—to an economy that has already lost a quarter of its GDP. The Greek government has lost any real legislative power, since any bill has to be approved by the Quartet before being submitted to the Parliament. On the side of the executive power, the tax-collecting body, the General Secretariat of Public Revenue, is now fully 'independent' of the elected government and is in reality controlled by appointees of Brussels. Decrees issued by the Secretariat have an equal value to decisions of the Cabinet—this is written in the Memorandum. Then there's the Council for Fiscal Discipline, with five

members, functioning along the same lines. They are unaccountable to any governmental authority, closely monitored by the Quartet and can impose cuts on any expenditure if they suspect there might be a deviation from fiscal targets, which demand a 3.5 per cent surplus from 2018. Deprived of its levers, the Greek state is also being stripped of its remaining assets. The airports have already been sold to a German company, of which the major stakeholder is the federal state of Hesse. The banks have essentially been sold to vulture funds. Home reposessions will start this February. Syriza is very proud to have obtained measures which they say will protect 25 per cent of mortgages; meaning that 75 per cent will be opened up to recuperation by the banks.

The Tsipras government is trying to win time by dragging out negotiations, especially over pension reform. This is an explosive issue, because pensions are already very low in Greece; yet for hundreds of thousands of households, often containing two or three generations, they are the only source of income. Syriza is playing with the deadlines imposed by the Quartet—it was December, then January; every new deadline is presented as some kind of victory. Then there is agriculture. Greece is the last Western European country with a significant primary sector: about 10 per cent of the active population are small-scale farmers. There is a deliberate plan to eliminate this sector through over-taxation, to restructure, concentrate and open it up for agribusiness, which is almost nonexistent in Greece. The sort of small-scale Greek capitalism that has existed for decades is being eliminated in services, too. The coastline is being sold for next to nothing, either for real-estate operations or to the large-scale tourist industry—the tourist sector in Greece is still mainly dominated by family firms. The goal is a Greece of cheap labour, nonexistent social rights and a few ruins and beaches. A mixture of Bulgaria and Tunisia, with the political regime of a Kosovo, as I said. This is the future that Syriza is preparing.

So has Syriza now stepped into the shoes of PASOK, as the representative Greek party of the neoliberal centre-left?

PASOK was once something much better than that. For a long time people associated it with important social gains—the welfare state built in the 1980s, and the deep democratization of that time. Unlike in other European countries, the late 70s and early 80s were a good time in Greece. There was a real confidence that we could follow our own path

of social change and national independence. It was a creative period; the advances in fields like labour law and education were among the most progressive in Europe. There was a sense of optimism that lasted for decades—even in the 2000s it still meant something, despite the corruption. Corruption also produces corrupt subjects; PASOK corrupted Greek society and the popular classes, and the effect was devastating. But then PASOK was eaten up by the Memoranda. They are like Molochs, the Memoranda: they constantly need new sacrifices. In that respect, Syriza took over from the PASOK of George Papandreou Jr, as the next sacrificial victim.

To whom would you compare Tsipras now, as a political figure? What's the difference between him and Renzi, for example?

Renzi doesn't come from the left; he never claimed to be a radical figure. Perhaps one could compare Tsipras to Achille Occhetto, the Italian Communist Party leader who liquidated the whole tradition of the party. Occhetto visited NATO headquarters in Brussels and said, 'This is the centre of world peace.' He visited Wall Street and said, 'This is the temple of civilization.' These are things no social democrat, or even a conservative, would ever say. The Italian Marxist Constanzo Preve made the point that former left-wingers who disintegrate internally tend to stop believing in anything. Having taken decisions that put them in a position in which their whole framework of values has to collapse, they come to do things no bourgeois or right-wing social-democratic politician would contemplate. Like the former Comecon *nomenklaturists*, who led the most ferocious neoliberal reforms: when your inner world collapses, you become a bearer of nihilism—you will do anything in order to stay in power. Tsipras, who built his entire political position on a pledge to abolish the Memoranda, now becomes their loyal servant.

In political nihilism, astonishing things can happen. The Syriza government has become one of the most hawkish in the region. The pro-Israeli turn in Greece was initiated by Konstantinos Mitsotakis in the 1990s, then deepened by Simitis and George Papandreou. Syriza had promised to break off military cooperation with the Israelis. In the first seven months there were minor attempts at developing a certain independence in foreign policy, but in relations with Israel there was a discreet continuity. Now the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a statement disagreeing with the EU policy of labelling products from the

Occupied Territories. Tsipras visited Jerusalem and recognized it as the capital of Israel; even the Americans haven't done that. In September 2015 Greece took part in a military exercise on a scale unprecedented in the eastern Mediterranean, with Israel, Egypt, the US and Cyprus. It's a strategic orientation: they're panicking about the situation in the region and think that aligning themselves with the Americans and the Israelis provides some safety. This is what I mean by nihilism: Schäuble asked for pension cuts, for home reposessions by the banks; he didn't ask for subservience to Netanyahu.

What lessons should the European left draw from Syriza's experience?

First, that it's impossible to fight austerity or neoliberalism within the framework of the existing monetary union, and, most likely, of the EU as such. A rupture is indispensable. Second, the political practice of radical-left parties vitally needs to articulate parliamentary politics with popular mobilizations; when the second is lost, the first becomes weightless, and actually reinforces the ongoing collapse of representative politics. Third, a proper reinvention of a broad, anti-capitalist vision of society is needed—neither a return to the old recipes, nor a mythical *tabula rasa*.

It was predictable that defeat in Greece would send a negative shock wave across the rest of Europe. Though there are other factors involved, I think it played a role in Podemos saying they won't break with the euro, not even with the Stability Pact, and revising their position on the debt. Currently, they're not even setting a break with austerity as a condition for collaboration at government level. Iglesias says that the point is to rise above the shoulder of PSOE and orient the hand of social democracy to the left. The Portuguese have drawn a similar conclusion; there the impact of Syriza's defeat is even more apparent. I can understand that the deal struck by the Left Bloc and the Portuguese Communist Party with the Socialists was to some extent a tactical move, because the right had lost its majority in parliament, and there was a demand to allow the Socialists to take over—otherwise the right would once again be in command. But it's a fundamental mistake for formations of the radical left to agree to a line that is merely complementary to social democracy. We don't need radical-left parties to make deals with social democracy to limit foreclosures, raise the minimum wage by €50, cancel some redundancies in the public sector, and so on. If we really think that's the best we can get, we should operate within the framework of social

democracy, and try to obtain some concrete improvements. But for a political current that supposedly has an alternative vision for society, accepting this as the horizon can amount to giving up on that vision.

That's the danger that the remainder of the radical left faces in Europe now, after Syriza's failed attempt: the danger of giving up on the very idea of more radical change. But not everyone draws the same conclusions. Mélenchon has organized discussions in Paris about the need for a Plan B—I think he has drawn more correct conclusions from the Greek case, and denounced Tsipras's capitulation. He is now talking openly about the necessity for all the parties of the European radical left to make alternative plans which do include the option of leaving the euro and preparation for full-scale confrontation. There is a similar conference in Madrid initiated by the left of Podemos—*Anticapitalistas* and other forces on the radical left in Spain, which also include part of the Catalan radical left, and so on. So, there are forces who are drawing the relevant conclusions.

The paradox of the Greek case is that, although it ended in disaster, at some moments it gave us a glimpse of what an alternative might be. The sequence of the referendum was vital in relaunching the process of popular radicalization. It showed a way to combine electoral success and popular mobilization. It was an important event: the first time a people has defiantly said 'No' to an ultimatum from Europe's ruling powers, on such a scale. We should remain faithful to the meaning of that event and reject the dominant narrative, which asks us to pretend it never happened.

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